

The Acropolis Museum's Parthenon Gallery and Caryatids

Displaying history as a political act

Melissa Amalir
Level 5 Illustration
Visual Essay
Tutor: Nicola Ashmore



First opening its doors in 2009, the Acropolis Museum stands at the foot of the Acropolis Hill in Athens. The project was funded by the Hellenic Republic and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) as a historic and educational site (Giotis, Chiotis). A site-specific museum, it was created to house the archeological findings from and around the Acropolis.

This essay will investigate how this site-specific museum, which merges history with modernity, seeks to create a conceptualised version of the historical walk through the Acropolis and will focus on how two specific exhibits- the Parthenon Gallery and the display of the Caryatids- function as a political message about the repatriation of the Parthenon Marbles on display at the British Museum.

As fig. 1 illustrates, the museum is a modern, minimalist building at the base of the Acropolis Hill in direct view of the Parthenon, which visually mirrors some of the Parthenon's classical design elements. These include the rectangular structure of the buildings and the vertical lines present in both architectural works: the marble columns in one are echoed in the concrete pillars of the other. The diagonal lines on the ground floor of the modern structure also mirror the pattern of degradation of the Parthenon, and the high, narrow windows on the first floor echo the empty space left by the Parthenon's ionic pillars. Thus, we see that the architect Bernard Tschumi has referenced the new museum's historical subject in his design.



fig 1. The Acropolis museum, Bernard Tschumi, photograph, edited by author

The combining of antiquity with modernity continues into the museum's interior. As fig. 2 illustrates, the Acropolis Museum is built over the Makriyianni excavations, a recently discovered archaeological site. The floors of the museum's entrance, lobby and terrace floors are partially made from glass which provides the visitor with a view down into the excavations. As art historian Elizabeth Molacek writes, this "visually integrates the ancient world into the modern world" (Molacek), continuing this merging of old and new in the museum.

This view of a piece of ancient history directly beneath the visitors' feet also creates a unique sense of immersion- the visitors are walking over the same stones that the people of ancient Greece did thousands of years earlier. Professor Dimitrios Pantermalis, who was President of the Board of Directors of the Acropolis Museum until his death in 2022, said in an interview, "It's as if you're in history, as if you're standing on history." (Portosalte).



Fig 2. The Makriyiannis excavation site. Acropolis Museum, photograph, edited by author

This sense of following in the footsteps of ancient history is integral to the design of the Acropolis museum. Tschumi conceived it as a "conceptualized version of the Acropolis itself" (Molacek), meaning that the goal was to construct an experience for the visitors that resembled visiting the Acropolis .



Fig. 3, Archaic Acropolis Gallery, Acropolis Museum, photograph, edited by author

The museum is built over three floors, connected by a series of slopes which simulate the uphill walk to the Acropolis. Adding to this is the manner in which the sculptures are displayed (fig.3, shown larger on the next page). The exhibits on these floors are presented on pedestals, scattered about the hall as they would have been in the temple of the Acropolis (Molacek). Besides the historic reference, this method of display creates a sense that the gallery is populated; the sculptures become part of the crowd of visitors walking among them. Furthermore, the openness of the gallery means that these displays are visible from multiple levels throughout the museum. Head curator of the Acropolis' antiquities, Alexandros Manos, explains that "one sees these compositions as a whole, understands them better and admires them all the more." (Portosalte).

Finally, as the floor to ceiling windows in fig. 3 reveal, the natural light of Athens was also vital to the architects. Michalis Fotiadis , who also worked on the project, stated that "The exhibits were made to be in the Attic light, and in the new museum they will continue to be in the Attic light,". This quote reveals again how important the historical context of the pieces on display was while conceptualising the new Acropolis Museum.

These combined factors create a sense that the visitor is immersing themselves in history. This, as well as the contrast between the sleek modernity of the concrete and glass, and the aged, honey-coloured marble invites the visitor to consider the relationship between past and present.



Fig.3



fig4. the Parthenon Gallery, photograph, Acropolis Museum , edited by author

In the same way that the walk up the Acropolis hill leads to the Parthenon, the summit of the museum opens onto the Parthenon Gallery, which perhaps is the most striking example of this recreation of the past in present tense that the museum has to offer.

This gallery (fig. 4) was specifically designed to accommodate the Parthenon marbles, and displays the first complete recreation of all 160m of the Parthenon's ionic frieze in 200 years (Marshall).

The Frieze and Metopes- the marble relief-carved blocks which adorned the Parthenon's exterior wall- are displayed along a long rectangular core at the centre of the room. The core has the same dimensions and orientation as the Parthenon's original Cella (the interior part of a temple which houses the image of a deity(Webster)) and the steel columns which display the Metopes the same in number as the Parthenon columns. The marble sculptures which populated the temple's pediments are exhibited on low pedestals where they can be seen from all directions. (The Parthenon Gallery).

Perhaps the most impressive part of this particular display however is the view.

The Parthenon Gallery is encased in floor to ceiling glass walls, or a “glass envelope” on the other side of which one can see the Parthenon.

Fig. 5 shows not only this but also that when it is dark outside, the contents of the gallery is reflected onto the glass, overlaying the Parthenon. The visitor is thus confronted with the exhibit in both its current and historical settings. As Tschumi writes “This glass envelope is a powerful tool of re-contextualization as it not only enables visitors to see the Acropolis, only 500 meters away, but also promotes visual connectedness within the space of the Museum” (Tschumi)

We see, then, that the Acropolis museum is a site-specific museum which offers a modern experience of antiquity and encourages its viewers to consider the pieces on display in both their historical and modern contexts. However, the Parthenon Gallery reveals a second truth about the museum’s conception: it has been strategically designed with political intent.



Fig.5 The “glass envelope” of the Parthenon Gallery, photograph, Melina Mercouri foundation, edited by author

In the 19th century, Thomas Bruce, Lord of Elgin removed a great number of the marble sculptures from the Parthenon, to the detriment of the monument and its remaining sculptures and reliefs (Merryman).

Today, these pieces are displayed at the British Museum, despite official requests for their return from the Greek government from 1983 onwards (Merryman). These marbles, along with a few on display in other western museums, are the those whose stark white forms stand out so distinctly against the honey-coloured marble.

Indeed, as fig. 6 shows, one can distinguish two visually opposed types of exhibits in the Parthenon gallery. The marble plaques in the background are darkened and weathered, as are, to a lesser degree, the two horse heads towards the back of the pedestal. On the other hand, the statues visible in the foreground are bright white plaster casts. This juxtaposition between the old and new is a continuation of the visual themes of the museum. More than this however, these casts serve as a silent reminder to the visitors of what is not here. As archeologist and curator Naya Charmalia stated in an interview with NPR, “everyone understands what is missing”. She continues to explain that though statistics and numbers can be hard to grasp, a visual symbol such as this is easy to understand and hard to ignore (Poggioli).

The full recreation of the frieze using plaster casts was inspired by Alexandros Mantis’s discovery in the original Acropolis Museum’s storage of perfectly preserved plasters given to Greece by the British Government at the request of the Greek authorities in 1846 (Portosalte). These are the casts currently on display in the Parthenon Gallery and their use adds a further political dimension to the gallery, which could be seen as an almost ‘passive aggressive’ message towards the British Museum. Although it is unclear whether the request in 1846 was limited to the casts or extended to the return of the originals, these plaster casts are emblazoned with “the emblem of Old Albion, a copper seal” (Manos). The symbol of Great Britain on the back of the casts suggests a claim to ownership which is strongly refuted by the Greek population who view the marbles as a part of Greek identity (Plantzos).



Fig. 6. Replicas of the Parthenon sculptures at the Parthenon floor of the Acropolis museum in Athens, Louisa Gouliamaki, photograph, The Guardian

The desire for their return was a key factor in the conception of the new Acropolis museum. As Dr Molacek put it, the objective behind the museum was “to design a space both to house the treasures of Greece and consider the display of the Elgin marbles upon their return” (Molacek). We can say then, that the plaster casts act not only as reminders of what is missing, but also as stand-ins for Elgin marbles, should they be returned to Athens.

In the past, the argument was made that the Elgin Marbles should not be returned as there was nowhere in Greece with the facilities to adequately store and preserve them (Plantzos). This state of the art museum then, can be seen as a direct rebuttal of this idea.



Fig.7, *The Elgin Gallery at the British Museum*, Andrew Dunn, photograph, 2004, *Le Journal des Arts*

In a similar way to Tschumi's conceptual design of a modern walk through the acropolis, the British museum display of the Parthenon Marbles seems to strive to simulate a historical experience, this time with the aim of creating an austere sense of solemn revelry in the in visiting a grand temple. Fig 7. reveals a long hallway, displaying the 247 feet of frieze taken by Lord Elgin in the 19th century. The architecture of the hall replicates that of classical Greece; tall marble columns frame the doorways, and the yellowed stone walls that match the aged marbles, create an introspective, temple-like gallery.

According to their website, the British museum is a space that unites all of human history and culture under one roof (About Us). The trustees' position on the subject of the marbles is that "They're a part of the world's shared heritage and transcend political boundaries." (Trustees Statement), and thus that they should remain in their place at the British Museum. Both museums' websites state that they value a continued partnership with each other, and indeed have collaborated on research projects, exhibitions, and a complete digital recreation of the Parthenon frieze (parthenonfrieze.gr). Despite this, the feeling in Greece remains that the marbles should be returned to what is considered their 'rightful home' (Plantzos). As Christopher Marshall states in his essay on both museums, "the very powerful political argument that this transparent gallery, bathed in Attic light and in direct communication with the Acropolis' earlier remains in the galleries below and with the Parthenon above, is now able to stake a claim as the sculptures' natural repository in a way that the closed, introspective emphasis of the British Museum's displays could never achieve"

Although the Parthenon Frieze tends to be the most debated issue, the British Museum holds other pièces from the Parthenon, that, for Professor Dimitrios Pantermalis, were far more painful than the frieze.

Pantermalis described Lord Elgin's removal of the marbles as the "tragic dismemberment of a monument" and called for "cultural cooperation that can rectify that unpleasant, tragic event of 1800". (Portosalte)

The issue of repatriation surrounds not just the frieze but individual sculptures as well. Figures 8 and 9 reveal two fragments of the same sculpture housed in each museum. Fig. 8 is part of a bust, currently held at the British Museum. It shows the back and shoulders that have been replicated with plaster in fig. 9, displayed at the Acropolis Museum.

These fragments are one of many examples of single sculptures being split between the two museums. Pantermalis stated at the time of the museum's opening "We have from the same figure, half of the body in Athens, half of the body in London. We have a body in London and a head in Athens. We have horses in London, and the tails of the horses are in Athens. It is a moral problem in art of divided monuments" (Poggioli). This "moral problem" begs the question of whether a fragment in the British Museum's extensive collection is so necessary for "uniting human history" (About Us) that it justifies keeping them indefinitely incomplete, when the possibility of it once more becoming a whole is so readily awaiting. Would the reunification of these pieces not be a better way of preserving and displaying history ?

These fragments however are little known or spoken about. The most effective display by the Acropolis Museum in terms of public reaction is the Caryatids.

fig 9. Parthenon. West pediment. Poseidon, Pheidias' workshop. Architectural sculpture, 437-432 BC, marble, Parthenon Gallery, Acropolis Museum, edited by author

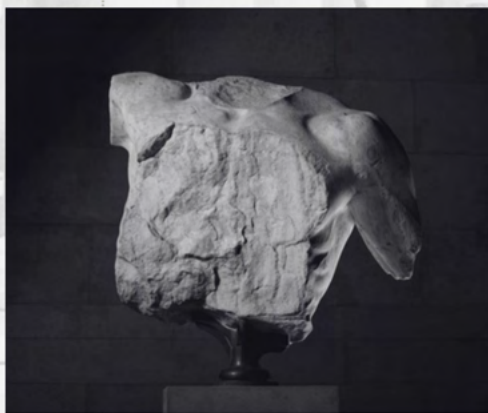


fig. 8 The Parthenon Sculptures, pediment, Pheidias' workshop, Architectural sculpture, 437-432 BC, marble, British Museum, edited by author





Fig 10. The Caryatids at the Acropolis, Andrey Khrobostov, photograph, 2016, shutterstock, edited by author

Described as a “a subversive display of resistance” by journalist Liz Alderman, the Caryatids of the acropolis museum stand on the first floor of the gallery and are unmissable (fig. 10). They are equally spaced on a platform in the centre of the exhibition hall in the same order they would have been when they served as pillars, holding the roof of the south porch of the Erechtheion, the most sacred temple of Athens (Acropolis Museum). The even spacing between the five maidens makes obvious the gap where the museum’s curators believe the sixth, currently at the British museum, should be.

Unlike at the Acropolis, where they are unmissably placed at the centre of the gallery, the sixth Caryatid is displayed in a corner near the exit of a room at the British Museum (fig. 11). It is not given the same value as the items on display in the British Museum’s Parthenon Hall.

Seeing the two methods of display side by side, it is difficult to help anthropomorphising the statues and seeing the Caryatid displayed at the British Museum as lonely and uncared for compared to ‘her sisters’ at the Acropolis museum and this has broadened the reach of the emotional element of the debate which has sparked protests and international support of this Caryatid’s return to Athens



Fig 11. The lonely Caryatid, D.W. Frauenfelder, photograph, 2024, The Invention of Greek Mythology, edited by author



Fig.12. Sonia Theodoridou's protesting Caryatids at the British Museum, photographed by Theodore Orphanides, 2014, edited by author

In June 2014, six Greek women led by opera singer Sonia Theodoridou, and dressed as the Caryatids, walked through the British Museum in an act of silent public protest. Figure 12 shows them standing around the statue, pensively looking up at her. After the protest, they sat in Hyde Park, surrounded with flags that depicted the Caryatid accompanied by the words "I want to go home" (ProtoThema).

This protest is perhaps the most visually striking of the many that have occurred since the Acropolis museum first opened its doors. The effect the Acropolis display has had on the public however, is particularly noticeable on social media.

Social media searches for "Acropolis Museum" and to a lesser degree "British museum" bring up images of groups posing in front of the statue with Greek flags and content showing images of the Caryatids in Athens and London, accompanied by captions such as "do you think they miss their sister", "she's being held hostage in London while her sisters are home safe in Athens", and "they plead for their sister's return". These posts are made by people from multiple nationalities and frequently have thousands of likes, showing the global impact that the Acropolis' display has had.

This idea of the lost sister of the Caryatids is not new among modern Athenians- when the Caryatid was first removed, there were tales that ‘her sisters’ could be heard weeping at night (Alderman). However, the international embrace of the myth of the lonely sister is a new phenomenon, sparked by the empty space left for her at the Acropolis Museum. American history teacher D.W Frauendauer describes being moved to tears at seeing the Caryatid at the British Museum after having seen ‘her sisters’ in Greece (Frauendauer).

Children’s picture books that share this narrative of a lost, lonely or kidnapped sister are further evidence of the story’s international appeal. All these books were published after the museum’s opening in 2009, showing that The Acropolis Museum’s display has inspired creatives to pass the story on. An example of one such book is *Nights without Carrie* (fig. 13) by Niki Dollis with illustrations by Eleni Oeconomopoulou. Published in 2015 and originally written in Greek, *Nights without Carrie* tells the story of the Caryatids waking up at night and reminiscing, wishing their sister “Carrie” would return to them (Plantzos). The book has since been translated into English and is being sold at the Acropolis Museum (Plantzos). The translation of these books into English shows a desire to spread the myth to a wider audience, and establishes a “personal, therefore affective, relationship between the young readership and the “abducted” artifact” (Plantzos).

Thus, the Acropolis’s display of the five Caryatids successfully mythologises Elgin’s removal of the marbles via anthropomorphisation, increasing public outrage towards the British Museum.

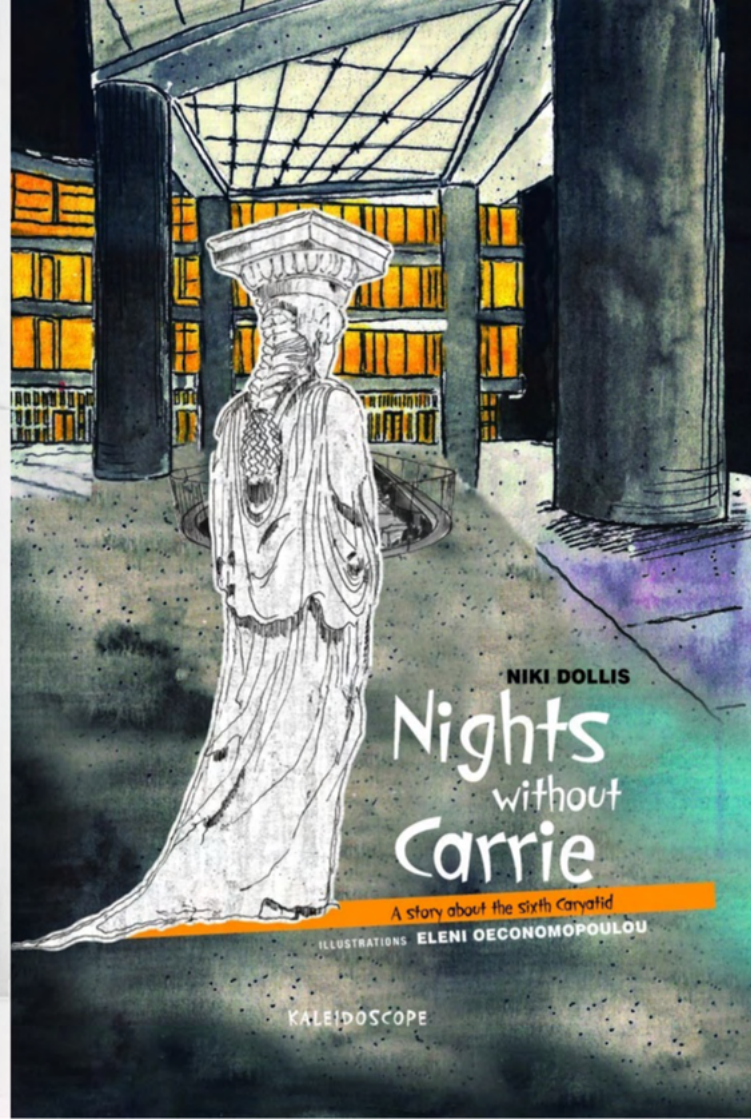


Fig. 13. *Nights without Carrie* by Niki Dollis, Eleni Oeconomopoulou, book cover, 2015

In conclusion, the Acropolis museum is a site-specific museum that blends antiquity with modernity to simulate the past and is a successful vehicle for its campaign for the return of the Elgin Marbles. The careful curatorial choices made in the museum raise awareness, target the visitors' emotions, and influence their opinions, which has in turn shone a spotlight onto the repatriation debate.



fig. 6, edited by author

Bibliography

About Us | British Museum, www.britishmuseum.org/about-us.

Alderman, Liz. "Acropolis Maidens Glow Anew." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 7 July 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/07/08/arts/design/caryatid-statues-restored-are-stars-at-athens-museum.html.

"An Original Protest for the Return of the Parthenon Marbles." Newsroom, ProtoThema, 9 June 2014, en.protothema.gr/2014/06/09/an-original-protest-for-the-return-of-the-parthenon-marbles/.

"Erechtheion. Karyatid. Kore B." Acropolis Museum | Official Website, www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en/erechtheion-karyatid-kore-b.

Frauenfelder, D.W. "The Lonely Caryatid." *The Invention of Greek Mythology*, 3 July 2024, greekmyth.substack.com/p/the-lonely-caryatid.

Giotis, T. C. & Chiotis, T. "The new Acropolis Museum in Athens, Greece: the unique project of a lifetime!", Project Management Institute, 2010

Marshal, Christopher R. "ATHENS, LONDON OR BILBAO? Contested narratives of display in the Parthenon galleries of the British Museum" *Museum Making, Narratives, Architectures, Exhibitions*, Edited by Suzanne MacLeod, Laura Hourston Hanks and Jonathan Hale, Routledge, 2012

Merryman, John Henry. "Thinking about the Elgin Marbles." *Michigan Law Review*, vol. 83, no. 8, 1985, pp. 1881–923. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1288954>.

Molacek, Elizabeth, "The New Acropolis Museum" chapter 5 of *Politics of Art, Debating the Marbles*, Edited by A.M.Dissinger& V.G.A.Ikeshoji-Orlati, 2011 University of Virginia

"The Parthenon Frieze." parthenonfrieze.gr/en/?sn=0.

"The Parthenon Gallery." Acropolis Museum | Official Website, www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en/exhibit-halls/parthenon-gallery.

"Parthenon Sculptures - The Trustees' Statement | British Museum." British Museum, www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/parthenon-sculptures/parthenon. Accessed 3 Apr. 2025.

"Parthenon Sculptures - The Trustees' Statement." British Museum, www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/parthenon-sculptures/parthenon. Accessed 4 Apr. 2025.

Plantzos, Dimitris. "The Archaeology of Exclusion: Repatriation, Whiteness, and a Lost Daughter Named Carrie." *Athens University Review of Archaeology*, Aug. 2024, www.academia.edu/110906472/The_archaeology_of_exclusion_Repatriation_whiteness_and_a_lost_daughter_named_Carrie.

Poggioli, Sylvia. "Greece Unveils Museum Meant for 'stolen' Sculptures." NPR, NPR, 19 Oct. 2009, www.npr.org/2009/10/19/113889188/greece-unveils-museum-meant-for-stolen-sculptures.

Portosalte, Aris. A Conversation with Alexandros Mantis- The Acropolis Museum "Dialogues on the Acropolis: Scholars and Experts Talk on History, Restoration and the Acropolis Museum," Athens, Greece: Skai Vivlio, 2010, archive.org/details/dialoguesonacrop0000unse/page/4/mode/2up.

Portosalte, Aris. A Conversation with Dimitri Pandermalis- The Acropolis Museum "Dialogues on the Acropolis: Scholars and Experts Talk on History, Restoration and the Acropolis Museum," Athens, Greece: Skai Vivlio, Jan. 2010, archive.org/details/dialoguesonacrop0000unse/page/4/mode/2up.

Image List

Cover image caryatid. Erechtheion, Architectural sculpture, marble, 421BC-406BC, British Museum
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1816-0610-128

Background image: Fig.3

Fig. 1. The Acropolis museum, Bernard Tschumi, photograph,
<https://www.tschumi.com/projects/2/>

Fig 2. The Makrigiannis excavation site. photograph, Acropolis Museum
<https://www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en/exhibit-halls/archaeological-excavation>

Fig. 3. Archaic Acropolis Gallery, photograph, Acropolis Museum,
<https://www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en/exhibit-halls/archaic-acropolis-gallery>

Fig. 4. The Parthenon Gallery, photograph, Acropolis Museum
<https://www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en/exhibit-halls/parthenon-gallery>

Fig. 5. The “glass envelope” of the Parthenon Gallery, photograph, Melina Mercouri foundation
<https://melinamercourifoundation.com/en/cultural-heritage/the-new-acropolis-museum/>

Fig. 6. Replicas of the Parthenon sculptures at the Parthenon floor of the Acropolis museum in Athens, Louisa Gouliamaki, photograph, The Guardian
<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/may/23/greece-rebuts-british-museum-claim-parthenon-marbles-were-removed-from-rubble>

Fig. 7. The Elgin Gallery at the British Museum, Andrew Dunn, photograph, 2004, Le Journal des Arts
<https://www.lejournaldesarts.fr/patrimoine/le-british-museum-refuse-un-scan-3d-des-marbres-delgin-160015>

Fig 8. Parthenon. West pediment. Poseidon, Pheidias' workshop, Architectural sculpture, 437-432 BC, marble, Parthenon Gallery, Acropolis Museum
<https://www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en/parthenon-west-pediment-poseidon>

Fig. 9. The Parthenon Sculptures, pediment, Pheidias' workshop, Architectural sculpture, 437-432 BC, marble, British Museum
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1816-0610-103

Fig. 10. The Caryatids at the Acropolis, Andrey Khrobostov, photograph, 2016,
<https://www.lonelyplanet.com/articles/best-museums-athens>

Fig. 11. The lonely Caryatid, D.W. Frauenfelder, photograph, 2024, The Invention of Greek Mythology
<https://greekmyth.substack.com/p/the-lonely-caryatid>

Fig. 12. Sonia Theodoridou's protesting Caryatids at the British Museum, photographed by Theodore Orphanides, 2014
<https://en.protothema.gr/2014/06/09/an-original-protest-for-the-return-of-the-parthenon-marbles/>

Fig. 13. Nights without Carrie by Niki Dollis, Eleni Oeconomopoulou, book cover, 2015
<https://kaleidoscope.gr/en/books-in-english/9789604710898-night-without-carrie-453.html>